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FM AMEMBASSY VATICAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1166
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0090
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0075
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 1204

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000101

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/1/2034

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [KIRF](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#) [VT](#)

SUBJECT: PATRIARCH DELLY AND TEHRAN ARCHBISHOP COMMENT ON CHRISTIANS
IN IRAQ AND IRAN

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CLASSIFIED BY: Rafael Foley, Polchief.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, Cardinal Emmanuel Delly, and the Archbishop of Tehran, Ramzi Garmo, briefed polchief on September 25 about problems their communities face in Iraq and Iran. Delly said that there is no organized persecution of Christians in Iraq, however they are targeted by extremists. He opined, however, that there is no freedom of religion in the country-and requested USG support for economic development for villages in the Ninewa plains, which are mostly Christian. Delly said the Iraqi government cannot provide security and for this reason he is ambivalent about the departure of the U.S. military. Archbishop Garmo reported Christians in Iran are not allowed to build new churches and that they suffer employment discrimination. End summary

¶2. (U) Cardinal Delly was in Rome for an audience the Pope granted to heads of the Middle East region's seven Catholic Rites (Maronite, Armenian, Syriac, Melkite, Chaldean, Latin and Coptic) on September 19. Delly also participated in a preparatory session for a Special Synod of Bishops for the Middle East to be held in the Vatican October 10 to 24, 2010. Garmo was in Rome for the preparatory meeting.

No freedom of religion

¶3. (C) In a meeting with Embassy Vatican polchief on September 25, Delly and Garmo distinguished between "freedom of religion" and "freedom of religious practice." Delly said that there is no religious freedom in Iraq, because conversions to Christianity are impossible. He also complained that Iraqi inheritance laws favor Muslims. For example, under current law a single man within a Christian family who converts to Islam inherits the entire estate of his parents. Garmo said inheritance laws in Iran are the same. Furthermore, Iranian Christians are not allowed to build new Churches and face discrimination when looking for employment. Garmo added that he had to pay the Iranian government \$800K to keep a building used as a home for the elderly, which had been donated by the wife of the Shah decades ago. The GOI repudiated the donation and demanded compensation to the State. Delly and Garmo reported Christians can go to mass and pray (i.e., "religious practice"), but that religious freedoms in Iraq and Iran end there. (Bio note: Although he is the Archbishop of Teheran, Garmo is Iraqi.

End note).

Violence and persecution

¶4. (C) Delly believes that while Al-Qaeda and extremists sometimes target Christians, these attacks do not amount to organized persecution. Like Christians, many Muslims suffer from terrorist violence. Delly stated that criminals and unscrupulous individuals further target Christians, however, to force them to flee and then squat in their homes. Religion is the pretext but the real motive is material gain.

¶5. (C) Delly believes that the U.S. should not have intervened militarily in Iraq. Now, however, he says it is better for Iraqis --and for minorities in particular-- that the American troops stay. Delly doubts the Iraqi Government's ability to provide for the security of its citizens. (Delly added that he can not say this publicly because he would be accused of siding with the Americans.)

¶6. (C) To curb the exodus of Iraqi Christians, Delly requested that the USG support the economic development of villages in the Ninewa plains that are mostly Christian. He estimated there are about 25K people in these villages, and 20k are Christian. Delly reported he had visited these poor villages and nothing has been done to support their development or create jobs.

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Comment

¶7. (C) The Pope's decision to convoke a Special Synod of Bishops for the Middle East in 2010 reflects his concern for the future of Christianity in the region where it originated. The visit of Patriarch Delly and the other heads of Eastern Catholic Rites help the Vatican to learn from the firsthand experience of those on the frontlines of interreligious coexistence. Other than to call for respect of religious freedom internationally, which it does constantly, the Vatican by itself can not do much for Christians in the Middle East. But it can shine a light on the issues. The Special Synod should help to attract international attention to the concrete problems religious minorities face in the Muslim-majority countries of the region.

¶8. (C) The Vatican welcomes leaders like Delly, who put in perspective the problems of Christians in the Middle East. Delly underscores that Christians are an intrinsic part of the cultural landscape of the region, and that most of the problems they face are the same as those faced by non-Christians: bad governance, lack of jobs, violence, etc. He publicly refuses to focus solely on the problems of Iraqi Christians, preferring to speak about the problems of all Iraqis, including Christians. At the same time, he quietly advocates for specific measures -- such as creating jobs in the villages of Ninewa -- that can halt or slow the exodus of Christians from the region. Delly also does not hesitate to point out discriminatory practices against religious minorities. End comment.

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